

Family Formation and the Future – European and American Perspectives

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The Danube Institute, in partnership with the Youth Research Institute, organised a two-day conference titled "*Family Formation and the Future: The Geopolitical, Cultural, and Legal Dimensions of Demographic Change*" in Budapest, on April 1 and 2, 2025, addressing the pressing challenges of declining fertility rates and the future of families. As demographic trends reshape societies worldwide, the need for sustainable family policies has never been greater. Hungary, with its pioneering approach to family support, served as a focal point for discussions on how economic, cultural and legal measures can encourage childbearing and stronger families. By fostering dialogue and sharing best practices, the event aimed to contribute to global efforts in securing the future of family life.

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Family Formation and the Future -- Day 1

The first day of the conference opened with a welcome address by István Kiss, Executive Director of the Danube Institute, followed by, Helen Roy, co-organiser of the conference, Budapest Fellow at the Danube Institute, and author at the online journal Fairer Disputations.

H. E. Ambassador Eduard Habsburg-Lothringen, Hungary's Ambassador to the Holy See and the Sovereign Military Order of Malta delivered the keynote address. His speech highlighted the role of cultural and religious traditions in shaping attitudes toward family life. He compared his experience as the father of six children in Europe, where he rarely sees families this big, versus in the USA where often his family is considered small in religious and conservative circles. The Ambassador described children as a gift of life to one's spouse through a deeper discovery of each other, to one's other children as sibling relationships are invaluable, and to society at large, for they are the future.

Balázs Hankó, Hungarian Minister for Culture and Innovation, outlined Hungary's innovative economic measures, including tax incentives and direct subsidies, designed to encourage childbearing and ease the financial burden of raising a family. He underlined that it is their goal to ensure that those who choose to have children are not disadvantaged financially. He went on to call into question Brussels' and climate activists' goals to reduce fertility: How can they claim that having children goes against the preservation of life? The Hungarian government, as he stated, has undertaken the mission of fighting against this mainstream narrative and championing life.

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The Demographic Picture in the US and Hungary

The first panel discussion featured a lecture by Georgina Kiss-Kozma, Head of Research at the Youth Research Institute, who presented comparative demographic trends between Hungary and the United States; her presentation sought to answer the question which is becoming all the more relevant, why do we need children? She outlined the demographic situation in Hungary today, the perceived achievements of Hungarian family policy, and compared young Hungarians' and Americans' opinions and plans on family and starting a family. Her analysis provided context for subsequent discussions on how policy and cultural shifts influence population growth and family structures. Following the lecture, a roundtable discussion delved deeper into the factors influencing demographic trends. The panel included Emma Waters, Researcher at The Heritage Foundation, Gergely Réti, Collegium Commissioner at MCC, and Johanna Frohlich, Researcher at Ludovika University. The discussion was moderated by Levente Székely, Head of the Center for Sociology and of the Youth Research Institute at MCC. The discussion covered topics such as the USA's so-called "marriage recession", the role of motherhood in society, and the difficulties young people face in dating. Moreover, the participants outlined the Hungarian government's family support network, comparing it to some of the efforts put in place in the USA. The panellists discussed the phenomenon of certain tight-knit religious communities which have managed to maintain relatively high birth rates. Emma Waters highlighted that it is the technology of the present that shapes our culture, and this is one of the driving forces behind lower birth rates.

Robert Palladino, Chargé d'Affaires, a.i., at the U.S. Embassy in Hungary, addressed American policies on marriage and family. His remarks covered the legal and social policy frameworks shaping marriage rates and family formation in the United States. He also mentioned the issue of drugs: Hungary and the USA alike are strengthening anti-drug efforts. In the USA, as he reminded, the opioid crisis is one of the most destructive forces going against families in America today, and President Trump is trying to make a difference in this.

Marriage, Family and Public Policy

The next panel explored the role of public policy in strengthening family structures. The discussion examined which policy interventions — such as tax benefits, childcare support, the restriction of porn, and work-life balance initiatives — are most effective in supporting marriage and family life. The panellists included Brad Littlejohn, Director of Programs and Education at American Compass, Tim Carney, Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, Patrick Brown, Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and Fiona Bruce, Conservative Member of Parliament for Congleton from 2010 to 2024. Fiona Bruce began the conversation by highlighting the extent of the crisis of families in the UK: currently the United Kingdom has the highest rate of broken families in the world, fatherlessness is incredibly common. Moreover, over the course of her work, she came to discover that the social work system is extremely splintered and works in silos; in more extreme cases, families could have overfifteen staff working on their case and not communicating with each other. To solve this issue, she helped promote a country-wide social services program that assists the family comprehensively as a unit. Next, Brad Littlejohn spoke at length on the porn epidemic. He pointed out that by allowing children to have smartphones, parents unknowingly invite anyone

into the process of raising their child. Early exposure to porn leads to shortened childhoods and expedited adulthood, and simply relying on the parental control settings of devices is laughable. He believes that access to porn must be restricted and considers the argument that this is an infringement on free speech invalid. Next, Patrick Brown emphasised that today, one of the most expensive parts of raising children is not the everyday cost of care, but rather the *"opportunity cost"*; in other words, the fact that a mother cannot do paid work for a period of time. He believes that people view marriage today as more of a *"capstone to be achieved than a cornerstone of life"*. Regarding the situation in the USA, he mentioned that more American women remain unmarried than ever before, and that the historic baby boom was tied to a building boom, whereas now real estate is more expensive than ever. Increasing available housing could be a route to raising fertility rates, he suggested. Lastly, Tim Carney, author of *Family Unfriendly: How Our Culture Made Raising Kids Much Harder Than It Needs to Be*, discussed some of the findings of his book and brought a comical example of one of the biggest challenges (and possibly turn-offs) of parenting: the struggles associated with the car-seat. In his opinion, America's crippling reliance on cars is one of its most family-unfriendly aspects. His research shows that proximity to high fertility communities can result in higher fertility at a base level. The panel was moderated by Zsófia Rácz, Editor-in-Chief of Hungarian Conservative and former Deputy State Secretary of Youth Affairs of Hungary.

Men, Women and the Birth Dearth

After a lunch break, the conference resumed with a panel examining the sociocultural and economic forces behind declining fertility rates in developed nations. The discussion focused on shifting gender roles, incentives for marriage and childbirth, and the broader implications of population decline. The panellists included Brad Wilcox, Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia, Erika Bachiochi, Professor at Harvard University and Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Louise Perry, Author of *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, Catherine Pakaluk, Professor at the Catholic University of America, and Imre Bedő, Founder of the Men For All Organization (Férfiak Klubja). Brad Wilcox started off the conversation by bringing men into the focus: According to some surveys, women are generally not satisfied with the dating pool of men. Important attributes that women seem to be attracted to include a man's ability to provide, protect, and pay attention. Brad Wilcox then sought to flesh out the question of what pushes the weaker men down. One prevalent example he presented was the poor performance of men within education in comparison to women. Another statistic he highlighted shows that when a husband loses his job, the chance of divorce goes up by 30 percent, but when the wife becomes unemployed, the risk of divorce is negligible, which underscores the essentiality of a man's ability to provide. His research shows how important strong males are to healthy and happy families. Next, Louise Perry, host of the podcast *Maiden Mother Matriarch*, explained that while many are approaching this question from several directions, it is very difficult to pinpoint one factor as the cause of dropping fertility rates. She believes, however, that in the big picture, affluence seems to be the root cause of falling fertility rates. As soon as almost any country reaches a certain level of affluence, their fertility rates begin dropping. This begs the question, whether affluence itself is self-sustaining or leads to an *"evolutionary bottleneck"*. Erika Bachiochi then followed, discussing the gender roles and socialisation of young women and men today. She underscored the increasing polarisation between the two sexes – especially on the political spectrum. Even though, according to her, conservatives may tend to side with and sympathise

with young men, we must strive to understand and elevate young girls as well. Catherine Pakaluk began her talk by describing the societal and economic transformation that followed the large scale introduction of cars and how rapidly they were adopted for being more efficient, hygienic and faster than horses. In fact, today, about the only people who keep and care for horses are those dedicated to equestrian culture. She then related this to having children today: Only the dedicated choose to have children due to the demands of modern life and the lack of financial incentives. She ended her presentation by calling for more kindness and understanding towards (often religious) communities that foster high fertility rates. Imre Bedő returned the conversation to contemporary gender roles and the plight of men. He believes that in order to be valued again properly in families, men need to have their own spheres, in which they are honoured for their contribution. His organisation has launched several initiatives to promote this concept and get fathers involved in their children's lives and activities without the help or involvement of mothers.

The conference continued with a report on family and youth aspirations in Poland, delivered by Barbara Socha, President of the Generations Institute Foundation in Poland and former Polish Deputy Minister of Family & Social Policy. She shared insights on demographic shifts and family formation trends in her country and how the relationship young people have with their parents impacts their own future plans. She found that many young Poles foster a close relationship with their mother but not with their father. Regarding Poland's demographic situation in general, Barbara Socha revealed that her country has been struggling with high rates of childlessness since the end of WW2.

This was followed by a report on Hungary's demographic and social policies presented by Katalin Gyurkó, Ministerial Commissioner for Intergenerational Cooperation, who provided examples of some of Hungary's most fertile communities. She described two particularly interesting examples: Százhalombatta, an industrial town located next to Budapest, and Sepsiszentgyörgy (Sfântu Gheorghe), a town in Transylvania, Romania, with a majority Hungarian population. Katalin Gyurkó attributed the higher fertility rates to small but visible efforts on the municipality-level supporting families, thriving communities where young people can meet, and most importantly, local jobs available for young people. She remarked that when youth move or migrate to new locations, typically for work, their childbearing is postponed on average by five years.

What is to Be Done?

Miriam Cates, GB News Presenter and Conservative Member of Parliament for Penistone and Stocksbridge from 2019 to 2024, delivered a speech outlining potential strategies for dealing with demographic decline in the UK. She also underlined the severity of broken families in the UK: nearly 2.5 million children do not have their father in their lives. In other words, as she starkly put it, British children are more likely to have a smartphone than a father at home. She outlined the unquestionable family-based principles that most of humanity was based on until about 50 years ago: parental authority, lifelong marriage, and the sanctity of children. However, currently these principles are not only continuously under fire but also simply not widely held anymore. She emphasized that parenting must be learned – it is not necessarily instinctive. Thus, these liveable principles and good parenting must be brought back into the public sphere. One more point she

added was that governments should introduce economic incentives for staying home and raising children. More specifically, she believes that the number of children a woman has had should be calculated into her eligibility for the age pension as this may offer a solution to both population ageing and falling birth rates.

The closing panel of Day 1, with Erik Almqvist, Former Swedish MP, Miriam Cates, GB News Presenter and Conservative MP, Anna Nagy, Founder and Chair of the Board at the Single Parent Families' Centre, András Pári, Scientific Vice President at the Mária Kopp Institute for Demography and Families, and moderator Philip Pilkington, Visiting Fellow at the Danube Institute, began by debating the success of family policy communication in Hungary. András Pári listed some markedly improved demographic indicators such as the higher marriage and lower abortion rates as well as Hungary's improved fertility ranking within the EU. Erik Almqvist, who currently lives in Hungary, mentioned the many fun and well maintained playgrounds built throughout Hungary as a small but meaningful example of family friendliness. He also talked about the need to extend the middle class to help facilitate childbearing similarly to Sweden, as more people in the upper-middle class manage to achieve their desired fertility of two or more children. Anna Nagy used the example of billboards at Budapest Ferenc Liszt International Airport displaying Hungary's family-friendly stance in dozens of languages. She also drew attention to the fact that Hungarian family policy is designed for all families, including patchwork and single-parent families that she works with most often. Miriam Cates left the audience with a message that she finds effective when promoting pronatalist, pro-family policies: It is widely known that most women regret not having any children by the time they reach their 40s or 50s. By introducing measures that support the institution of the family, governments are allowing women to achieve their dream of motherhood, if that is what they seek.

Family Formation and the Future -- Day 2

Building on the themes of the first day, the second day of the conference examined crime, immigration, aesthetics, technology, social welfare, and the spiritual dimensions of modern society.

The keynote address was given by Balázs Orbán, Political Director to the Hungarian Prime Minister. He emphasised the Hungarian government's commitment to policies that support family stability and demographic growth. He outlined the broader geopolitical context of demographic trends and discussed Hungary's pioneering role in developing pro-family economic policies. Balázs Orbán criticised the liberal ideology on family and population as well as migration: Liberals have weakened the foundation of society, the family, and thus have weakened their nations. He joked that Budapest serves as the ideal conservative safe space within Europe, and expressed his hope that the United States, under the second Trump administration, will continue to be more open.

Crime, Immigration, and the Family

The first panel of the day tackled one of the most pressing issues in contemporary politics: the impact of crime and immigration on family stability. Moderated by Simon Hankinson, Senior Research Fellow at The Heritage Foundation, the discussion focused on whether current immigration and criminal justice policies strengthen or weaken communities and family units.

Heather MacDonald, Fellow at the Manhattan Institute, presented data on urban crime trends and their consequences for families, particularly in high-density areas. She finds fault with the fact that the only allowable explanation for higher crime and incarceration amongst Black people in the USA is systemic racism; she believes the issue is much more complex and that the anti-police stance is not helpful in resolving this at all. She pointed out that though Black people bear the brunt of crime in the US, it has not had an impact on their fertility rates. They do, however, suffer from the highest rates of broken families and missing fathers. Asian families in comparison have shown remarkable success in American society, and much of it is connected to extremely tight-knit families and parental involvement. Mark Krikorian, Executive Director of the Center for Immigration Studies, analysed the role of immigration policies in shaping social cohesion, questioning whether current policies are conducive to family-oriented communities. He pointed out that immigration does not raise fertility rates, in fact, when there is a substantial influx of immigrants to a community, the native population typically suffers lower fertility. Theo Wold, former Deputy Assistant to President Donald Trump, highlighted the legal and policy implications of mass migration on national identity and family structures. He denounced the concept behind immigration that *"anyone can do anything anywhere."* Not only is this simply not true according to him, but also, it implies that humans are mere *"widgets"* that can be transplanted wherever there is an economic need for them. Daniel Whitehead, Senior Fellow at the Hungary Foundation, compared the liberal ideology and the conservative perspective on immigration, concluding that the leftist views will not stand the test of time and will eventually fail. Juan Angel Soto Gomez, professor at the Universidad de Navarra, spoke last, bringing examples of the emerging dire situation in Spain. While there is already immense pressure on the Canary Islands and other coastal locales, regions such as Catalonia have been purposefully importing non-Spanish-speaking migrants to boost their numbers. He believes that gang activity is on the rise due to this influx of migrants which will only be exacerbated by the threat of ethnic gang wars.

The Role of Aesthetics in Public Life

The conference turned to a topic often overlooked in policy discussions: the role of aesthetics in shaping public life. Moderated by Ashley Noronha, Professor at the Pontifical University of Rome, the panel explored how beauty influences social cohesion and cultural continuity.

Jan Bentz, Professor at Oxford, argued that aesthetics is a fundamental aspect of civilisation and that societies that neglect beauty in architecture and public spaces suffer from cultural fragmentation. Anthony O'Hear, Professor at the University of Buckingham examined how artistic traditions and urban design can foster a sense of belonging and community. He believes the family is where a respect for beauty should be fostered, and every child should receive a proper education in music and the muses at home. John Noronha, Professor at the Pontifical University of Rome, discussed the moral dimensions of beauty, linking aesthetic principles to broader philosophical and theological concerns. He revealed that his background in engineering lead him to seek out more in the world than the frameworks, logistics and strict confinements that defined his work, bringing him to where he is today.

Tech and Human Relationships

After the lunch break, the conference resumed with a panel on the effects of technology on human relationships. As digital technology increasingly mediates social interactions, this discussion, moderated by Emma Waters, Researcher at The Heritage Foundation, addressed the challenges posed by social media, artificial intelligence, and digital communication.

Mary Harrington, author of *Feminism Against Progress*, examined how modern technology affects gender roles and traditional relationship structures. She discussed her idea of truth-seekers in the modern world and, referring to John Noronha's statements, the case for engineers in finding order within that truth. Alexandra Kaschuta, writer and host of the *Subversive* podcast, spoke about the alienating effects of digital culture, arguing that online interactions are reshaping expectations around intimacy and social bonds. She opened by telling a typical story of boy-meets-girl from before the era of dating apps, however, admitting that she herself met her now-husband online. She emphasised the need for human interaction in human development and understanding of who we are as young men and women. Nina Power, author of *What Do Men Want?*, provided a philosophical perspective on how the internet has altered human behaviour, especially in the realms of dating and marriage. She cited a shocking statistic from her home country: only one percent of the UK attends church regularly, revealing a fundamental disconnect from their faith as a country. She pointed out, however, that if we were not feeling this epidemic of sadness and depression from all this time spent online and technology-centric lifestyles, then we would be truly lost. In other words, this feeling of emptiness and sadness proves that our humanity is still present, and that we need human interaction and real-life experiences. Francesco Giubilei, Italian columnist and political analyst, considered the implications of digitalisation on family and public life, particularly the situation with artificial intelligence. Oftentimes, artificial intelligence can go as far as to step in to solve human conflicts, thus taking the whole personal aspect out of the experience and relegating it to technology.

Judit Regős, Social Policy Expert and President of the Parents' House Foundation, then delivered a presentation on social welfare policies in Hungary. She outlined how government programs and community initiatives have sought to alleviate economic burdens on families, discussing the effectiveness of state interventions in supporting family formation and child-rearing.

The Political Reality of the Spiritual Dimension

In an era of growing secularisation, the next panel, moderated by Jonathan Price, Matraszek Fellow at Pusey House & St. Cross College, Oxford, and Visiting Fellow at the Danube Institute, addressed the question of whether faith still plays a vital role in shaping public life. The panellists debated the intersection of faith, politics, and cultural identity, exploring the role of religious traditions in contemporary governance.

H.E. Eduard Habsburg-Lothringen, Ambassador of Hungary to the Holy See and the Sovereign Order of Malta, provided historical and diplomatic perspectives on the enduring significance of religious institutions. He posed the question, "*Why are Christian societies so devoid of Christian faith?*". He recalled that former US President John F. Kennedy was the one to really launch this approach when, as the

first Catholic presidential candidate, he stated that he would not allow his faith to interfere with his politics (mainly in response to accusations that he would serve the Pope over the interests of his nation). The Ambassador believes that politicians should freely express their faith – and Vice President JD Vance is a wonderful positive example of this. Spencer Klavan, author of *Light of the Mind, Light of the World*, discussed the intellectual and moral foundations of the Christian tradition and their relevance in governing. According to him, no government could be that good if mankind is diminishing under its rule (i.e., birth rates below replacement); on the other hand, no government – and here he referred to the oft-criticized monarchies of the past – could be that terrible if they were contributing to a surging birth rates. Currently, he believes that the “*hiding latent principles*” in society that are suppressing fertility must be identified in order to reach a solution. Joseph Backholm, Senior Fellow at the Family Research Council, examined the implications of declining religious adherence for family formation and social cohesion. He quoted from the Book of Genesis, “be fruitful and multiply” and explained that this is part of the formula for happiness that God outlined in the very beginning for humanity. A simple formula for finding happiness, according to him, is “faith, fertility, friendship, and work” -- and this will in and of itself lead to flourishing birth rates. Solene Tadié, Europe Correspondent for EWTN, shared insights on religious trends across Europe, considering whether the continent is truly entering a post-Christian era. She brought some rather shocking figures from her country of origin, France, on the transmission of faith from parents to their children according to religion: while Muslims manage to transmit their faith at a rate of about 95 percent, Jews reach about 80 percent, and Christians manage only to pass on their faith at a rate of about 65 percent. In the brief conversation that followed, the speakers discussed how Christianity is an increasingly “cool” topic now entering the mainstream, however, also expressed their hope that people will maintain their true faith without the help of trends.

Last speaker of the day, Philip Pilkington, Visiting Fellow at the Danube Institute, provided an analysis of how economic structures influence demographic trends. Pilkington argued for the need to integrate economic reforms with pro-family policies to ensure long-term demographic stability. He pointed out that a libertarian approach will not only be unsuccessful in solving the birth dearth, but will not be able to solve the crisis of population ageing, either.

The event concluded with closing remarks from organisers Helen Roy and Melissa O’Sullivan, Deputy Director of the Danube Institute.

The discussions provided a multifaceted exploration of the challenges facing families today and underscored the need for holistic solutions that integrate policy innovation with cultural renewal. As demographic changes continue to reshape societies worldwide, the insights shared at the Danube Institute’s conference alongside the Youth Research Institute’s efforts will undoubtedly contribute to ongoing debates on the future of family and civilisation.